'A Sylph Beguiled':
The Riddle of "The Pang More Sharp Than All"

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COLERIDGE'S LATE POEM "The Pang More Sharp Than All" is itself a sylph beguiled, a delicate sinister creature, a sprite of indeterminate age and provenance, sorrowful and mischievous. It is flush with emotion and yet paralyzed by it. What ails it? Patricia Adair calls it "wearisome"; Tilottama Rajan finds the poem "pathetic"; Andrea Henderson, seeing a link between geometrical designs and lack of depth in the late poems, believes that the poem shows symptoms of an "illness" that "represents a failure of unification", a "pessimism regarding the possibility of love" that locks Coleridge inside himself, unable to love or to unify his works of art. These readers hint that the poem reveals "unmanly grief" (*Hamlet* 1, 2, 92), character weakness, an illness of the heart.[1]

The poem's dating is mysterious, too. J.C.C. Mays argues that it could have been written any time between the years 1807 and 1823.[2] Depending on the dating, readers have disagreed about which of the two major losses bracketed by these dates has caused "the pang more sharp than all." Each side is supported by echoes from notebooks, other poems, and marginalia. The early date 1807 marks erotic memories associated with Sara Hutchinson. Coleridge returns from Malta, eager to resume what he hoped would continue to be a reciprocal passion with her. His return is blasted by what he called "the EPOCH," the Saturday morning in Calne in December 1806, where he may or may not have seen William Wordsworth sprawled over Sara's "beautiful breasts" in a room in the Queen's Head Inn.[3] Her disenchantment with him was noticeable over a period of time in looks and scenes that Coleridge never could dislodge from his memory. These traumatic scenes establish the basis for recurrent images in "Pang" that circle around the realization of this loss. The later date, 1823, marks a paternal memory from July of the year before, associated with the loss of his son Hartley, who promised to return at six to help care for his brother Derwent in his fever, waved goodbye, and vanished from his father's sight on a London street.[4]

These two losses could both coexist in the poem, one laying the groundwork for the other. I believe that the loss of Sara Hutchinson was more grievous in removing the possibility of completeness in his life as a man and lover; J. Robert Barth has intuited the aching "personal level—the lament for Coleridge's very real, lost Sara," that has been "relatively neglected" in this

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[1] Adair, *The Waking Dream* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), pp. 222-6; Rajan, *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism* (Ithaca and London; Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), p. 239; Henderson, *Romanticism and the Painful Pleasures of Modern Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), pp. 263, 271.

[2] Headnote to "The Pang. .," Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed. J.C. C. Mays. 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), II, p. 826; hereafter *PW*.

[3] Anya Taylor, *Erotic Coleridge: Women, Love, and the Law Against Divorce,* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 146-7.

[4] Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections, 1804-1834,* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), p. 528. Holmes takes this loss of Hartley as the definite subject of the poem, and interprets the "He" of the poem as "Hartley."

poem.[5] This aching loss seems to me to be more intense than Coleridge's melancholy estrangement from his son, which had been building on disappointments over a decade. From Hartley's boyhood to the years of his bibulous troubles at Oriel College, as Coleridge frantically wrote to the Provost Coppleston begging that Hartley be reinstated, Coleridge frankly and sometimes cruelly expressed his distance from his son. He peppered the margins of his son's adult writings with mocking criticisms that reflect disapproval rather than sorrow.[6]

But the fascinating conundrum of which sorrow is worse has distracted critics from appreciating the complex activities of the poem itself, in particular its use of allegory to explore "the work of grief."[7] Coleridge experiments with an intricate analytic method in which abstractions, riddles, and personifications help him place his desolation. Whatever he may say about allegory in other contexts, in this poem and others of its type Coleridge writes out the tumult within, giving the emotions names and activities. As he notes in the spring of 1807, he uses "unimpassioned language… to express to my own mind *how* I have felt in the ground of my Being" (CN II 3027). Inadequate as these expressions may be, since they are only "modifications of air by the organs of articulation," he embodies his inner struggles in the rhetorical figures that Spenser, Milton, and other predecessors deployed—personification, allegory, analogy, and simile—figures for clarifying obscurities the better to penetrate them. These rhetorical figures return to an earlier purpose of poetry by bringing to the surface what John Mahoney calls "the darker nuances of the psyche".[8]

In an 1825 draft of "Work without Hope" Coleridge indicates that he purposely uses allegorical figures—"Shapes" and "Shews"—both capitalized, to help him understand his suffering:

> I speak in figures, inward thoughts and woes
> Interpreting by Shapes and Outward Shews.[9]

These figures, as Adela Pinch describes them in their eighteenth century appearances, take on "lives of their own," "autonomous forms," "stalking about as personifications often in vexed and detached relations to the persons presumed to be feeling them". Personifications have a psychological function: they "can both stabilize and clarify the notion of the person and present us

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[5] *Coleridge and the Power of Love,* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri, 1988), p, 110.

[6] For demeaning descriptions of his son see Anya Taylor, *Bacchus in Romantic England: Writers and Drink 1780-1830.* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999), p.126-156. Coleridge's comments in the marginalia to Hartley's *Worthies of Yorkshire and Lancashire* suggest disappointment in the Southey-wards warping of his older son's native brilliance and a scoffing dismissal of his son's salleys (CM 2, 50-85). His anger at Hartley's abandonment of his brother Derwent in his fever reinforces his disgust with his firstborn. But see Andrew Keanie for a view of Hartley Coleridge as a successful poet. (*CB* 33, pp.106-113)

[7] Cathy Caruth ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995).

[8] "'We Must Away': Tragedy and Imagination in Coleridge's Late Poetry," in J. Robert Barth and John L. Mahoney, eds., *Coleridge, Keats, and the Imagination: Romanticism and Adams Dream: Essays in Honor of Walter Jackson Bate* (Columbia and London: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1990), p. 127.

[9] *PW* II 606, headnote p. 1031.

with feelings in knowable forms". "Detached" from the self, seen from without, the emotions can be arranged and made "knowable" to the sufferer. As the sufferer experiments with representations of the emotions—trying out now this likeness and now another—his mind controls his roiling feelings, performing an inward psychomachia.[10] In the 58-line poem "Pang…," the poet sits naming and counting his "heart-griping sorrows," judging which is the sharpest.[11]

The poet poses a riddle to himself. Who is the "He" that has "flitted" from him? As in his early allegorical poem "Fire, Famine, Slaughter," which also takes the form of a riddle, the answer will be a single word. The five stanzas (a sixth that contradicted the others was rejected) edge around the identity of this single, masculine pronoun "He," each offering indirect answers. The final answer will appear enigmatically at the last line. The stanzas alternate outward-looking and inward-looking situations, systole and diastole. The first stanza tries to capture the nature of the absent "He" by comparing his departure to the voyages of medieval figures, pilgrim and knight, homages to the allegories of Bunyan and Spenser. The "He" is likened to the "warmthless flame" that beckons "the tir'd Pilgrim to a place of rest" and then vanishes before the Pilgrim has found it, a flickering flame that is colder and more delusory than the one on the grate in "Frost at Midnight." The "He" is likened next to an Elfin Knight who has won all the prizes but glides away before the ceremony can dub him the winner. These flitting departures—light, unobtrusive, secretive—lead in different directions, one to a delusory object, the other to a deceitful act. Both are representations of inconsequential movement—unfinished pilgrimage, unrewarded contest—outward from a center.

In the second stanza, again the "He" "hath flitted from me," again for no reason, since the abandoned center is a "a home of bliss," a "secret nest" welcoming and full. Enclosures encircle and intertwine, warmly breathing with Coleridge's favorite rondures: breasts, arms, kisses, breast-feeding infants, a father leaning over woman and infant, gazing at the breasts but not missing the child, the undeflected aim of his kiss (or so I interpret the beautiful but obscure line, "where the sweet mark emboss'd so sweet a targe" [l. 19]). This home welcomes Love, the heart of STC that he once believed "he was made for." The loss of these blessings doubles his sorrow, perhaps because they are losses to a double man, a lover and a father, and both these roles have disintegrated.

Moving outward again, stanza three introduces a family of figures reminiscent of Coleridge's own three children. Thinking biographically rather than allegorically, Mays and Holmes both believe that the "He" who flits away is Hartley Coleridge, and their conjecture applies well to this stanza, where the "He"'s flitting is likened to "a loose blossom on a gusty night," recalling earlier images of the child Hartley as a whirling blossom. The family dynamics of the

[10] Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion in Hume and Austen* (Palo Alto: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996), p.1. Morton Paley, *Coleridge's Later Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 104-8, observes that "prosopopeia is the dominant trope of this part of Coleridge's poetic career."

[11] CL V 249-51; See Taylor, *Erotic Coleridge*, p. 155

stanza, with the two younger twins, boy and girl, resembling Derwent and Sara (not twins of course, though boy and girl twins appear in the poem "Time, Real and Imaginary: An Allegory") echo elements of the relations between father and his variously creative or non-creative children, as he ranks them. But these children are allegorical figures whose interplay in the final stanza will help to establish the identity of the "He." The steady lad (possibly resembling Derwent's appearance as "a cube of fat") is called "Esteem" and his sister, "Kindness," described, not very flatteringly to the brilliant Sara, as "dimmer" than "that bright Boy who hath us all forsook," whose light she reflects as moon from sun, derivative daughter from self-creating son. Reading allegorically, this sister is Kindness, reflecting her vanished brother's look, "his full-eyed aspect," so brightly that she seemed "like Him," "the same!," but less radiant.

The allegorical mother of these allegorical children is Hope. In "Love's Apparition and Evanishment: An Allegorical Romance" (1833) Hope is a sibling; in "Pang" Hope gives birth to or generates the siblings. Graham Davidson believes that "Hope is deeply complex word in Coleridge," which "is almost always centred on the hope of loving and being loved." Hope is the openness to look ahead and to construct a new way of being and new connections with life; it is thus a matrix for the three siblings that personify different gradations of connection with others: love, esteem, and kindness, gradations amounting in the end to differences of kind. Hope also breeds imagination where it connects to the lives of other persons. When it vanishes, it leaves hopelessness, or worse, Hardy's "unhope."[12]

In stanza four the warm circle of stanza two freezes, this time centering not around kissing limbs and cheeks, but around a hard object, an orb, a glass or magnet, a relic of the devotion that is gone. The orb recalls ornate medieval reliquaries for holding the remnants of saints or caskets that do or do not contain a loved one's image. The magical glass was left behind by Merlin, another analogue for the nameless, absent, and mesmerizing "He." These metals and glass glitter, obsessively repeating the absence of the nameless figure. Rajan, deepening our understanding of the unreality of these objects, writes that what Coleridge "envisions is never the magic child, but its illusory repetition in the mirror of his mind… Through the crystal ball, Coleridge seems to thematize the dilemma of a language that must falsely create an object out of itself—a child or a figure of hope—in order to confer on itself a reality that is immediately put in question by the illusoriness of the object created" (239). In this mirroring glass "all long'd for things" repeat their beings. The magic image—orb or glass—has been left as another simulacrum for the "He," also identified with Merlin, the Knight, and the Pilgrim, identities that circle around a fixed chasm. Stanza four climaxes with the mysterious and melodically assonant concept, the "Sylph beguil'd… "

[12] Roseanna Warren, "Hardy's Undoings," *Fables of the Self: Studies in Lyric Poetry*. New York: W.W.Norton, 2008. In *PW* # 593, May 1829, ll. 6-8, an album verse, Coleridge again redefines Hope: "Hope leaves not us but we leave Hope/ And quench the light of Inward Youth," here suggesting that Hope preserves vitality as well.

> And there He left it, like a Sylph beguiled,
> To live and yearn and languish incomplete! (43-4)

The simile itself, true to the deceptive nature of its subject, attaches uncertainly to its pronoun reference. Does "like a Sylph beguiled" refer to the it or to the He, the glass orb or to the always "flitting He"? Or does it refer to a more distant antecedent, the secret heart, exiled, that can live, yearn, and languish incomplete, the poet's empty residue of a love that once was? The circle where warmth once breathed in stanza two is now a metallic repository for loss.

In the fifth and last stanza the poet's voice breaks through the figurative tangle with two direct questions to the reader expressing amazement that he himself can suffer as much as he does:

> Can wit of man a heavier grief reveal?
> Can sharper pang from hate or scorn arise?—
> Yes! (44-6)

Like Edgar, he knows that "the worst is not/ So long as we can say 'This is the worst'" (*King Lear* 4, 1, 27-8). Yes, it would be worse for the loved being to pretend to love out of pity and cringe at her own deceptiveness. The final stanza is tainted by theatrical falseness. Kindness no longer glows with the reflected light of love, but now dissembles pity verging on contempt. She borrows her absent brother's robes and "enacts the fairy Boy that's lost and gone." At the urging of "Esteem" she dons her disguise. The final couplet tells the answer to the riddle, which the reader has awaited with suspense (Henderson, 267):

> O worse than all! O pang all pangs above,
> Is Kindness counterfeiting absent Love! (57-8)

The riddle is solved. "The Fairy Boy," "the bright boy," the "magic child," the "He," "Hope's last and dearest child without a name!"—all are identical to the allegorical figure "Love," "the same, the same," and the same in being absent.

But the riddle's solution is suspended by the ambiguities inherent in allegory's abstract and personal pivoting. Is the loved person gone, taking away love? Or has the emotion of Love vanished, the lover's heart turned cold without a "communicant"? In a notebook from 1810 Coleridge muses "when I pine after them and miss them with an aching hollowness in my heart, it is but a more melancholy way of continuing to love them"(CN 4039). Esteem is also an ambiguous figure, urging Kindness to parade in borrowed robes. Respect may be aloof and cold, tilting toward the envious. Has hope dried up with the loss of the loved one?

The characterization of Kindness as ashamed of her falseness, averting her face, "inly shrinking," may allude to the behavior of Sara Hutchinson in the last months of their intimacy, when, in Coleridge's mind at least, she had shifted her allegiance and perhaps even her passion, to William Wordsworth. This

bitter betrayal—"One pang more blighting-keen than hope betray'd!" ("Pang," v, 50)—is worse than scorn or hate. Various looks of pity seem to have been burned on his memory so that he can capture them here in a few words in an obsessive revisiting of an event that has "the irreducible specificity of traumatic stories." Recent studies of traumas—some world-destroying, some individual—illuminate Coleridge's intense focus on details of loss. Caruth explains that "[I]t is the literality and its insistent return which constitutes trauma and points to its enigmatic core"; "the fact that this scene or thought is not a possessed knowledge, but itself possesses, at will, the one it inhabits, often produces a deep uncertainty as to its very truth" (Caruth ix, 6). Beguiled by memory, Coleridge repeats the images to hold on to them and to make sense of them.

Dazzling phrases stud the poem, Wallace Stevens-like glories that do not always connect with located passion: "the menaced kiss," the "twy clustered hiding place of snow," "the wondrous 'World of Glass,'" and still hauntingly strange, "the Sylph beguil'd." These phrases correspond to some secret code that musically hums from his thoughts. Coleridge's meter, stanza forms, and rhymes are tightly disciplined, and tighten as the emotions splay out in the final stanza. He creates a knot of rhymes in the last stanza, struggling to pull emotions and analysis together. The technical prowess in having a 15 line stanza with only five rhyming sounds, and maintaining a complex, overflowing syntax seems a material reflection of the inner mental activity, heroic defiance in art, rather than a lack of manly fortitude in the face of loss.

In a note of 1810 (CN III 4039) Coleridge imagines the medieval courts of love and queries the levels of connection in a series of similes: Why is love like the sun? Why is love like the oak? These intellectual jousts indicate Coleridge's penchant for simile and other figures both playful and instructional such as analogy.[13] Coleridge does not always aim for the high energy fusions accomplished by metaphor or symbol, but toys with similitudes invented by the Fancy or the Understanding.[14] Susan Wolfson removes Coleridge from the straightjacket of his anti-allegorical formulations by noting that "the presence of the simile dramatizes the effort to find a language adequate to represent what is felt to escape representation"; it is "a resource for representing exactly those orders of thought symbol supposedly overcomes—the tentative, the provisional, the uncertain, and the ambiguous".[15] These less combustible imaginative forms analyze and consider by likenesses and degrees of coherence, they keep the fictiveness of their activity in play, they do not necessarily create a "whole."

Sorrow in the late poetry is signalled by a change in tone, style, and mode—analytical, intricate, and allegorical. The activity of devising these poems helps Coleridge to bear his losses and may account in part for the resilient intellectual

[13] See Anya Taylor, *Coleridge's Defense of the Human*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986) for the uses of analogy to accentuate difference of kind rather than of degree.

[14] Jeffrey C. Robinson, *Unfettering Poetry: The Fancy in British Romanticism*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), has also worked to dignify these schematic figures.

[15] Wolfson, "`Comparing Power': Coleridge and Simile" in *Coleridge's Theory of Imagination Today,* ed. Christine Gallant (New York: AMS Press, 1989), pp. 168 and 173.

vitality in the prose works of this period, where being a self-conscious human being requires sorting out one's moral qualities often in the forms of personification.[16] "The Pang More Sharp Than All" does a central work of self-recreation: it occupies Coleridge's mind; it gets control or the illusion of it; it assures the self that it still exists, and it circles back on moments of loss and keeps them vivid. Like Elizabeth Bishop 200 years later, Coleridge thrashes through similes to speak his loss outright:

> It's evident
> the art of losing's not too hard to master
> though it may look like (*Write* it!) a disaster.[17]

[16] For example, *Aids to Reflection,* ed. John Beer (London and Princeton, N.J.: Routledge and Princeton Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 63-5.

[17] Bishop, "One Art" in *Complete Poems 1927-1979* (N.Y. Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1989), p. 178.